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Neo-Traditional Sufism: The Books, the Shrine and the Relics of Sufi Barkat Ali in Faisalabad, Pakistan*

Alexandre PAPAS† and Ghulam SHAMS-UR-REHMAN‡

Introduction

Faisalabad, in Pakistan's Punjab province, is a relatively new city. Originally a settlement under Jhang district, which emerged as early as the late thirteenth century, the city developed from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Because of the lack of historical records for this period, the early history of the city remains poorly known. Having been integrated into the British Raj in 1858, it was given the name Lyallpur by colonial authorities in 1904 to honor the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, James Broadwood Lyall. Designed on the model of the Union Jack with eight avenues extending from a clock tower at the center, Lyallpur experienced industrial growth and market expansion in the 1930s. Its population greatly increased after the foundation of Pakistan in 1947, when Muslim refugees from Eastern Punjab and Haryana settled en masse in the city. The industrial revolution in the 1960s equally contributed to the population growth. Renamed Faisalabad in 1977 to honor the special relationship between Pakistan and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Faisalabad is now the third most populated city of the country.

This brief introduction of the city would seem to suggest that Faisalabad would be a mere colonial creation that successive civic administrations continued to develop until it became a modern metropolis. However, besides the British colonial rule and Punjab's urban development, Islam in general and Sufism in particular characterize the evolution of the city in terms of architecture, social life, culture, and religious practices and thought. The city, so-called "Manchester of Pakistan," because of its large textile industry, not only hosts manufactures and various markets but also harbors a rich Sufi patrimony through several shrines (*darbar*) and lodges (*khanaqah*), where Islamic mystical traditions are particularly well represented.

It is one of these Sufi institutions that will be discussed in the present article, since both the shrine and the relics of the founding saint, Abu Anis Muhammad Barkat Ali Ludhianwi, better known as Sufi Barkat Ali (1911–1997), play a key role in the socio-religious life of the city and beyond. After summarizing the life of the Sufi saint and describing the establishment he created, we shall review his written works and the community's publication policy. Finally, we will analyze the institution as an organic system combining Quran veneration, shrine

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lifestyle, and reliquary culture. The details of such a system suggest the emergence of a neo-traditional form of Sufism.

I. Sufi Barkat Ali and the Dar-ul-Ehsan

We know about the life of Sufi Barkat Ali from the hagiography written by his adopted daughter Sahibzadi Anis Akhter. Born in 1911 in Ludhiana district (Indian Punjab) to a pious Jat family, Barkat Ali learnt the Quran in his village and received his education at Halwara township. At the age of sixteen, he married a pious woman named Barkat Bibi, who bore him five daughters and two sons [Akhter n.d.: 3–5]. Barkat Ali joined the British Indian army in 1930 and spent most of his military career in Roorkee Cantonment in present-day Uttarakhand state in India. While serving as secretary of the Corps Commander, he was said to have led a spiritual life, praying, fasting, meditating, and reciting the names of Allah 11,000 times and the names of the Prophet 12,000 times every day; he also used to visit the shrine of Alauddin Sabir Kalyari, a 13th century Chishti saint, located near Roorkee [Akhter n.d.: 6–7]. It is there, in 1944, that Barkat Ali was initiated to the Qadiriyya by Hakim Sayyed Amir-ul-Hasan Saharanpuri (d. 1955), himself a disciple of Qari Shah Abdul Karim, who lived in Nasir Pur Kalan, Sargodha district in Pakistani Punjab [Akhter n.d.: 8]. This was a turn in the life of Sufi Barkat Ali.

After a mystical crisis, the devotee eventually left the army in 1945 to become a fakir, declaring that he was no longer an employee of the British Government but a servant of Allah. The Sufi then established three goals for himself, i.e., constant *dhikr*, spreading Islam, and service to humanity. After the Partition of 1947, he moved to Pakistan and settled in Salar Wala in the northern part of the district of Faisalabad where he was allotted a piece of land [Akhter n.d.: 9–11; Ashari 2012: 520–21]. There Barkat Ali founded his community around a complex called Dar-ul-Ehsan. After nearly forty years, because of collective efforts, the community had a congregational mosque, a hospital, a library, housing facility, and a special room for the Quran, on which we will return. Meanwhile, he wrote and compiled books to guide his disciples. For unknown reasons, in 1984 Barkat Ali had to move to Dalowal, located in the southern part of the district of Faisalabad, where the community built again a mosque, a hospital, a library, and the room for Quran in addition to a soup-kitchen (*langar*) [Akhter n.d.: 12, 14]. This site became what is now known as “Camp Dar-ul-Ehsan,” the epicenter of the Sufi community, on which this paper focuses.

The relocation of the community was like a new beginning in the sense that the Dar-ul-Ehsan became fully institutionalized. With branches opened throughout Pakistan and elsewhere thanks to Punjabi migrants (in UK especially), preaching sessions were set up for the followers; disciples who were able to do so paid visit to the Camp every month and stayed there for three days; itinerant preachers were sent to trains, buses, schools, universities, and

jails; from 1997 onwards, volunteers helped patients with eyes problems at the Dar-ul-Hikmat during March and October every year (this activity was already undertaken in the previous complex, but on a smaller scale) [Akhter n.d.: 15, 17, 20]. Treatment was free of charge. Charity activities of the Dar-ul-Ehsan included the distribution of monthly alms and goods to the poor, widows and the deprived; care for prisoners and lepers; and arrangements for the marriage of poor girls [Akhter n.d.: 19].

Sufi Barkat Ali set up the Dar-ul-Ehsan as a well-organized institution. Besides various rules that he established as chief administrator (*muhtamim*), he appointed a vice administrator (*na'ib*) with staff members and assistants [Akhter n.d.: 36]. In 1994, he also created a council of five members (Khan Abdul Samad Khan, Mian Faiz Karim, Mian Muhammad Shafi Gondal, Muhammad Najibullah Walana, and Mian Muhammad Zafarullah) to look after the affairs of the Camp Dar-ul-Ehsan after his death [Zamir 1997: 217]. He appointed Muhammad Najibullah as lifetime caretaker of the Dar-ul-Ehsan [Zamir 1997: 226]. The identity details of all disciples initiated by Sufi Barkat Ali or by his successors are properly recorded in a register [Zamir 1997: 221]. The organizers divided the disciples into groups based on their regional location for better networking. These groups have special schedules to stay and perform rituals at the shrine during the course of the year. Therefore, their sojourn at the shrine is no longer limited to three days, as is normally the case. Today, in the 600 or so preaching centers that are active across the world, the regional leader (*amir*) of each center organizes gatherings for *dhikr*. Moreover, these regional groups conduct religious preaching in their own area once a week [Siddiq Sadiq 2004: 158–59]. In contrast with, for example, the Tablighi Jamaat, which advises his devotees to conduct preaching travels out of city for three days, forty days, or six months, the followers of the Dar-ul-Ehsan preach in their own region and do not unnecessarily stay out of their homes at night.

Apparently, there is no permanent source of income for the shrine since its inception. The devotees of the shrine donate a considerable amount of money to run the religious and social welfare projects even though this is not something systematic [Zamir 1997: 216–17; Siddiq Sadiq 2004: 148–49].

II. Sufi Barkat Ali's Writings and Publication Policy

Sufi Barkat Ali was an indefatigable writer who began composing books as soon as he was initiated to Sufism. Among the hundreds of books or booklets attributed to him, about thirty titles (some in multiple volumes) are clearly identified. With the assistance of his secretary (*munshi*) Mian Muhammad Shafi Gondal, they were all composed in Urdu and Arabic; only a few of them have been translated into English so far. In this paper, we will briefly highlight some of his important works.

The figure of the Prophet Muhammad was central in the writings of Barkat Ali, not

only as the transmitter of Sunna and the ultimate model of sanctity but also as an object of devotion. For example, the *Kitab al-'amal bi al-sunna* ("The Book of the Practice of Sunna"), which consists of six volumes, was written between 1945 and 1967. According to its narrative, as reported by Barkat Ali himself in the foreword, Hakim Amir-ul-Hasan Saharanpuri took Barkat Ali to the shrine of Alauddin Sabir Kalyari and ordered him to compose the book. Interestingly, later on, Barkat Ali commissioned the English translation of the biography of Sabir Kalyari written in Urdu by another disciple of Saharanpuri, Haji Muhammad Bashir Ambalvi [1993]. The *Kitab al-'amal bi al-sunna* is a collection of hadiths, quoted in Arabic and commented in Urdu, to be practiced by disciples according to a time table (*nizam al-awqat*). The Arabic scholar Maulvi Abdullah of Moruthipur proof-edited the volume; his daughter and her husband funded the publication; and the rector of Al-Azhar himself reportedly recognized the work. Also centered on Muhammad, the *Asma al-nabi al-karim* ("The Bounteous Names of the Holy Prophet") in five volumes lists the 1437 names of the Prophet with their reference in Quran and hadiths along with Urdu translations.

Additionally, we find other writings devoted to the Prophet, such as the *Finality of the Divine Revelations and Prophethood on Muhammad*, a 56-page booklet in English, which is actually based on the letters written by Barkat Ali in response to questions posed by an American convert of Islam. Predictably, the sheikh promotes Islam above other monotheisms, and the Prophetic revelation as opposed to previous prophets, especially Moses and Jesus, but also Buddha, who is said to have predicted Muhammad's prophecy. Incidentally, the author shows his orthodoxy by rejecting three misunderstandings: the spiritual value of music and dance, theories about the distinction between Islam and Sufism, and the reference to the Bhakti syncretic movement in India. Also worth mentioning is a brief biography of Uways Qarani (d. ca. 37/657), the follower of the Prophet who never met him, who is described in his everyday ascetic and devotional life.

Equally monumental is the set of thirty volumes forming the *Makshufat-i-manazil-i-ehsan* ("Manifestations of the Stages of Blessing"), better known as the *Maqalat-i-hikmat* ("The Words of Wisdom"). This is both the biography and the sayings of Sufi Barkat Ali, covering a wide range of events: the family history, the dramatic account of the Partition, the migration interpreted as an initiatory journey, references to the lives of Sufi saints and great Muslim figures (such as Muhammad's companions, martyrs, etc.) in general, narratives of great battles for Islam, lessons on Sufism and theology, aspects of daily prayers, and so on. The work is written in relatively simple Urdu, using concise sentences, in order to be widely accessible. A much shorter book, the *Ta'lim al-din* ("Teachings of Religion"), is also didactic and introduces its readers to Islam according to Sufi views. Here, Barkat Ali stresses the need for a spiritual master who reforms himself before bestowing advice to others. The abridged version of the *Ta'lim* entitled *Talkhis* is systematically given to newly initiated disciples.

We have seen that health problems, especially those related to the eyes, were a main concern of Barkat Ali. In line with this concern and himself being a practitioner of Prophetic healing collecting herbs, minerals, and oils, he composed the *Kitab al-tibb* ("The Book of Healing") which contains 267 prescriptions for various diseases. It is important to note that, according to the author, cures are efficient only when they are accompanied by a spiritual reform of oneself and the practice of devotions and rituals. The fact is that, as we will see in the next section, remembrance (*dhikr*) is still a vital practice at the shrine of Barkat Ali who heavily stressed on the virtues of *dhikr*. It is then hardly surprising that he composed the *Dhikr-i-ilahi* in which we find argument on the necessity of remembrance as a purification method. Rather than a listing of ritual formulas (they are given in a booklet titled *Adhkar-i-jamil*), the *Dhikr-i-ilahi* presents three parts, which seek to provide *dhikr* with scriptural basis, namely the Quran, hadith, and quotations from the famous Egyptian scholar al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505).

Before evoking the shrine and its specifics, such as the *dhikr* session but also the cult of Quran and the relics of the founding saint, we would like to point out that Sufi Barkat Ali's written material, about whom we have only a limited account, benefited (and still benefits today) from an extremely active publishing policy, showing that the Dar-ul-Ehsan was and remains an institution typical of its time, that is, highly aware of the need to communicate, to spread its message, and to use technology to that end. In addition to the occasional books and booklets, Barkat Ali created the *Dar-ul-Ehsan Monthly*, a magazine with Urdu translations of the Arabic commentary (*tafsir*) of the Quran, the 10-volume *Ruh al-bayan* by the Turkish Cevelti sheikh İsmâil Haqqı Bursevî (d. 1137/1725), along with hadiths, epistles, biographies, events of the history of Islam, notes on rituals and Sufi institutions, reports on healing techniques, etc. After the death of Barkat Ali, it has been replaced by the *Anwar al-Barkat*, a monthly magazine serializing his writings. Last but not the least, thanks to a charity trust named Al-Barkat House established in 1984 in Huddersfield, UK, all of these publications are bound and printed in Lahore — a major place for publication in Pakistan — and were distributed free of charge, nowadays with versions in CD, DVD, and PDF files (downloadable online) included.

III. The Quran, the Shrine, and the Relics

Besides Barkat Ali's own emphasis on intellectual matters and spreading his message, it is clear that books *per se* represent an exceptional value in the eyes of his followers. The most revered book, that is, the holy Quran, plays a very specific role in both the organization and the ritual life of the Dar-ul-Ehsan complex. Of course, the veneration of Quran is widespread in the Muslim world and takes many different forms such as putting the book upon tombs or filling a bag with Qurans and hanging it at the wall of a shrine, and even performing *dhikr*

while kissing and holding the Quran at arm's length, as we have personally seen in Eastern Turkestan for the former and in Algeria for the latter. Yet, as far as we know, it is only at the Dar-ul-Ehsan that one finds a special, capacious room for the veneration of the holy book named Quran Mahal (Quran Palace) [photo 1 and 2]. We present the most important of the three Quran Mahals established by Sufi Barkat Ali; two are located in Faisalabad and one in Sheikhpura. More than 300,000 handwritten and published copies are said to be preserved in these Mahals; the most ancient copy is supposedly one thousand years old; these copies are of various sizes and weights, ranging from ten grams to three metric tons [Siddiq Sadiq 2004: 187].

This unique place established by Barkat Ali in 1984 and still developed by his successors today displays a collection of several thousand copies of the Quran in manuscript and print forms, standing on shelves in three walls covered by a black curtain resembling the *kiswa* upon the Kaaba. These copies were collected from various regions gradually. In the middle of the Quran Mahal stand four recent monumental manuscripts of the Quran entirely written in calligraphy by an anonymous disciple, with colorful illuminations and metallic or golden adornments [photo 3, 4, and 5]. Both the making of the giant Qurans, the collecting of copies, the preservation of books, and the pious visits (barefoot) to Quran Mahal are considered devotional acts in addition to the practices of reading and meditating on texts.

Quran Mahal is located in the northern part of the Camp next to an open-air ground that is currently used as a prayer area, where the original site of praying and meditation of Barkat Ali (now protected under a roof) is also located [photo 6 and 7]. On the southern side of the main path, which separates the two main parts of the Camp, in front of Quran Mahal, we have the Dar-ul-Hikmat (also called Dar-ul-Shifa) and the hostel facility for patients. The shrine of Barkat Ali is situated at the entrance of the Camp, behind a monumental minaret. Interestingly, the grave has no cupola but rests on a marble pedestal and is entirely surrounded by a vaulted wooden screen. Pious visitors continuously arrive at the shrine, often in male delegations (sometimes very large groups including children) entering one by one. In addition to the usual invocations (*du'a*), devotees take turns to perform loud *dhikr* constantly in front of the grave. This uninterrupted *dhikr* is, to our knowledge, a unique devotional technique, making a particular Sufi soundscape [on this notion, see Papas 2014]. As a sign of belonging but also a symbol of the grave, followers of the Dar-ul-Ehsan wear a small ochre-colored hat [photo 8, 9, and 10]. Many of them are Punjabis although some of them arrive from other parts of Pakistan.

Let us return to the Quran Mahal. Right next to it, on passing through a narrow door covered by a black curtain, one discovers the hall of relics (*tabarrukat*). In this fascinating room, descendants of Sufi Barkat Ali have collected the personal belongings of the holy man and set up a permanent exhibition of them. As is always the case in Sunni Islam, with

the exception of the hairs, nail parings, and teeth of the Prophet, there are no body parts. Preserved in glazed displays, various objects are present: the clothes (tunics, hats, and shawls), the wheelchair, the material for writing, the red sacred sheet (*chadar*) that covered the shrine of Amir-ul-Hasan Saharanpuri, and, lastly, a begging bowl (*kasa-i-mubarak* or *kashkul*), which is a symbol of poverty [photo 11, 12, and 13]. Visiting the hall of relics is also considered a pious act. The ambivalence of the reliquary culture developed by the Dar-ul-Ehsan is striking: if solemnity and even sacredness do surround the paraphernalia of Sufi Barkat Ali, and all these objects as they are displayed purposely reminds the sainthood of their owner, no cult is organized around the relics. There is nothing comparable to the worshipping of relics that we find elsewhere in Pakistan, especially in Sindh (for example, at the shrine of La'l Shahbaz Qalandar) [Boivin 2011], which consists of taking out the relics, showing them in a procession, and inviting devotees to touch them in order to get the saint's Baraka.

Barkat Ali's *tabarrukat* are traditional relics, that is, similar to the many others existing throughout the Muslim world following more or less the example of the Prophet's relics, but at the same time they undergo a process of "museumization" (in brief: exhibited but forbidden to touch), which is typical of what Sufis authorities encourage as modern expressions of devotion. In other words, Barkat Ali's relics stand between two worlds or two historical trends. More precisely, the reliquary culture of the Dar-ul-Ehsan suggests the emergence of a neo-traditional form of Sufism. This notion has been already mentioned about Sufism in Iran under the Islamic regime [van den Bos 2007] but needs, we think, further conceptualization. Let us sketch a basic typology in the context of contemporary Pakistan, although it may be applied to other countries. As opposed to traditional Islamic mysticism rooted in the past through chains of transmission (*silsila* and/or *shajara*) and conservative initiatory practices (probation period, initiation ritual, and secret teaching) — such as in the suborders of the Qadiriyya and the Chishtiyya in Multan [Shafique & Shams-ur-Rehman 2017; Papas & Touseef 2018] — neo-traditional Sufism does not necessarily exclude but either avoids or disregards both aspects. On the other hand, unlike neo-Sufism or rather New Age Sufism, which breaks with tradition in order to offer an access to mysticism without the weight of doctrinal frameworks and long practical processes — such as in the *qawwali* or devotional music sessions reinvented (some would say "damaged") by the Faisalabad born singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997), and perpetuated today by various Sufi Chishti singers [Baud 1996] — neo-traditional Sufism maintains a strong commitment to Islamic prescriptions as well as Sufi doctrine and practice. In the case of the Dar-ul-Ehsan, relics clearly illustrate this neo-traditionalism, and the same can be said about the books and the shrine: both the written materials and the veneration of Quran are certainly traditional activities of Sufis but the publication policy and the Quran Mahal are new adaptations of these activities; the shrine complex is of course in line with the institutional history of Sufism but peculiarities such as

the constant *dhikr* and the signs of belonging are new forms of Sufi communal organization.[1]

Conclusion

Interestingly, the anthropologist Katherine Ewing visited the Dar-ul-Ehsan in 1977 at the early phase of its development, and noted that Barkat Ali was "a living representative of a Sufi saint tradition, yet he is totally independent of the *sajjada-nishin* [i.e., the hereditary leadership] pattern" [Ewing 1983: 265–66]. She attributed the emergence of a saintly figure like Barkat Ali to his conversion activities and to the facilities for social welfare offered by his shrine, insofar as Pakistan's government promoted both conversion and social welfare through Sufi shrines. It is true that the community counted (and still counts) among its members high officials, and in 2013, the Pakistan Post Office Department issued a stamp honoring the saint as one of the "men of letters" of the nation. However, the expansion of the Sufi community both during and after Barkat Ali's life shows that this success is only partly due to the governmental promotion since 1959 of non-hereditary, in other words non-traditional, saints in Pakistan.

As we have seen, the religious identity of Barkat Ali's group is more complex than it seemed in the 1970s. Rather than being non-traditional, this is a neo-traditional community as we try to demonstrate, in which, ironically, hereditary succession has been applied recently. Right after the founding saint passed away in 1997, his disciples Mian Muhammad Shafi and Muhammad Najibullah (the husband of Barkat Ali's daughter Sahibzadi Anis Akhter) succeeded the master but it is Barkat Ali's grandson (Mian Muhammad Maqsud Ahmad) who is now in charge of a second Dar-ul-Ehsan institution in Faisalabad. More broadly, our hypothesis is that the neo-traditional Sufism embodied by the Dar-ul-Ehsan emerged because of the socio-religious history of Lyallpur/Faisalabad. In this respect, without going into the details, we may at least refer to two turning points. The first occurred in 1947 after the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. Like other cities of Western Punjab, Faisalabad received a mass of Muslim migrants from Eastern Punjab but, unlike Lahore or Multan, Faisalabad had no Sufi tradition rooted in the past, if we leave aside the isolated case of Baba Nur Shah Wali (dates unknown, perhaps medieval) now buried in Railway Colony. The few Sufis from the region, such as Baba Lasuri Shah (d. 1932) and Baba Qaim Sain (d. 1986), were all recent. After Partition, Faisalabad offered opportunities on the spiritual market for those who had to reconstruct their life and to struggle for social and religious recognition. Sufi Barkat Ali was one of them. The second turn took place in the 1960s with the growth in

1 It might be of interest to compare this neo-traditional use of signs of belonging with other cases, such as the Qadiriyye Rumiyye in Tophane in Istanbul. In this Sufi group founded by İsmâil Rûmî (d. 1041/1631) that we visited in October 2019, members now wear an ochre-colored vest; this is not an entirely new practice since the vest was used in the past but not as a rule at it seems nowadays. Many thanks to Thierry Zarcone for the details about this group.

the economy thanks to the development of the textile industry, which made Faisalabad both a place of massive labor migration and a modern metropolis with its cohort of entrepreneurs, administrative staff, college and university elite, and so on. For instance, the arrival of workers from across Punjab on the one hand and, on the other, the rise of a new educated class (physicians and scholars, mainly) swelled the ranks of a Sufi community such as the Dar-ul-Ehsan, which offered charity as well as education, piety as well as intellectual production.

To sum up, Sufi Barkat Ali's books, shrine, and relics are the visible signs of a neo-traditional Sufism, which has resulted from the specific history of an urban setting. The new phase of development of the Dar-ul-Ehsan towards globalization is likewise due to the worldwide migration of Punjabis. This is an on-going evolution, which would be interesting to follow in the subsequent decades.

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Photos

* All photographs come from © Archives Alexandre Papas, Ghulam Shams-ur-Rehman, and Muhammad Touseef

Photo 1: Quran Palace with walls covered by a black curtain

Photo 2: Four monumental manuscripts of the Quran

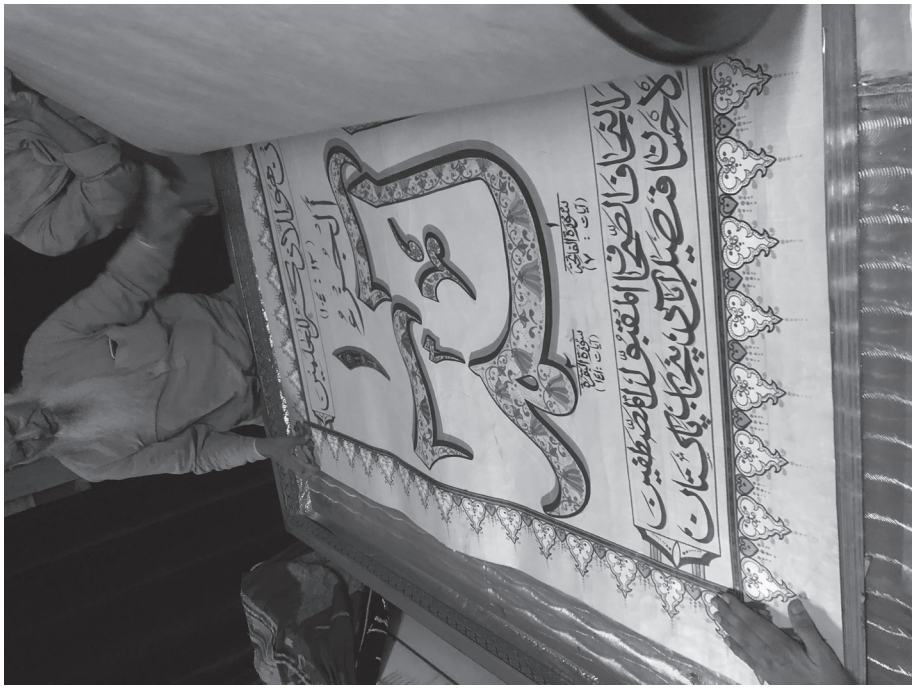

Photo 3: Front page of a monumental Quran

Photo 4: One page of a monumental Quran

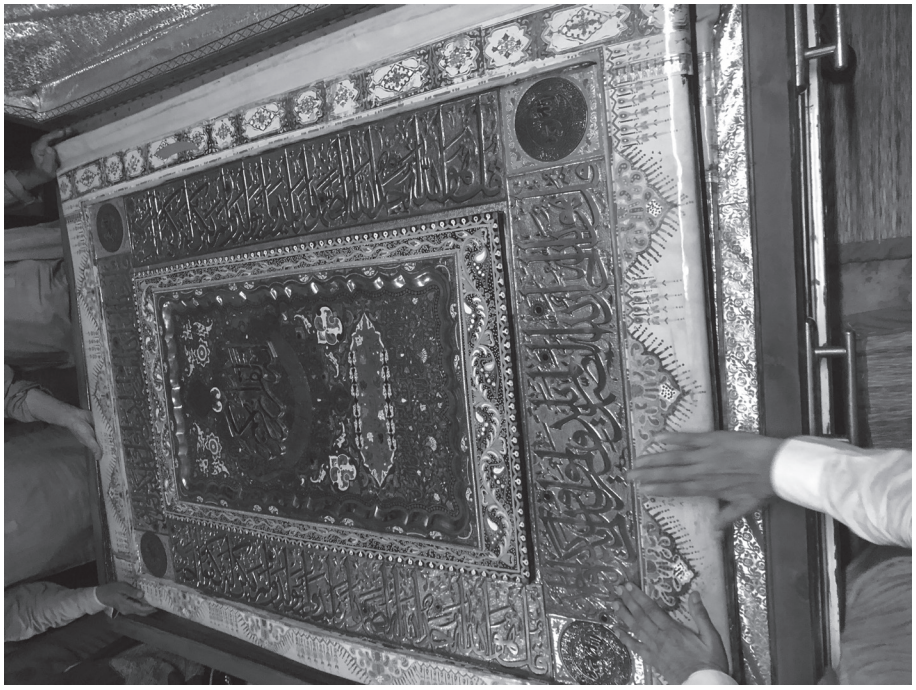

Photo 5: Cover of a monumental Quran

Photo 6: Original site of praying of Sufi Barkat Ali

Photo 7: Prayer area of the Dar-ul-Ehsan

Photo 8: Entrance of the Dar-ul-Hikmat

Photo 9: Shrine of Sufi Barkat Ali

Photo 10: Ritual of constant *dhikr* in small groups

Photo 11: Begging bowl and books of Sufi Barkat Ali

Photo 12: Red sacred sheet from Saharanpuri's grave

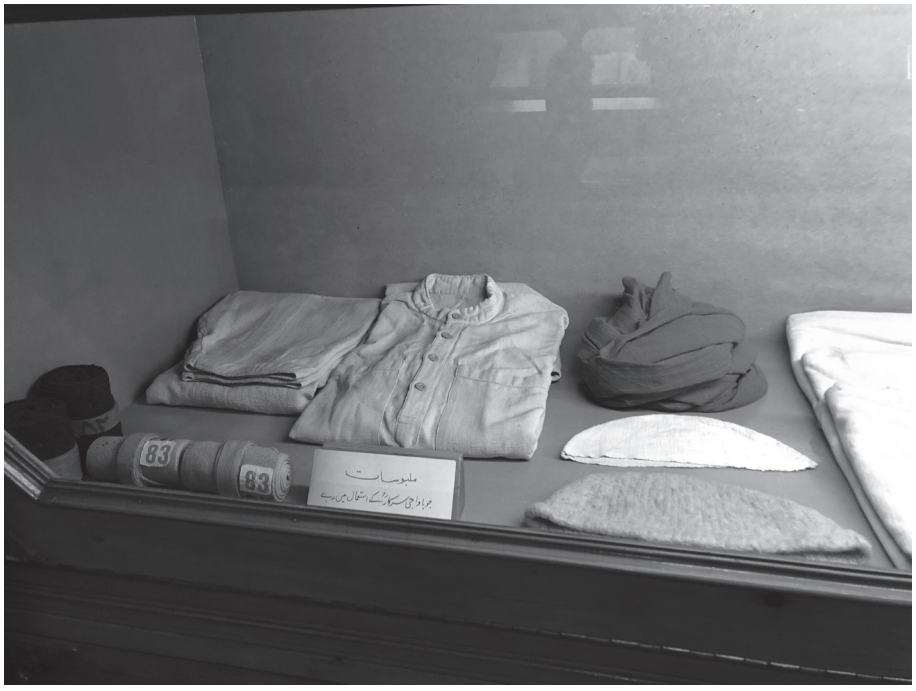

Photo 13: Clothes of Sufi Barkat Ali